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# Secret hearings held in Senate's 'steel box'

## Oversight panel puts it to use today

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On the second floor of the Hart Senate Office Building, an armed officer stands guard outside Room 219.

Inside: a soundproof, bug-proof, metal-shielded chamber where U.S. spy masters share deep secrets with their oversight watchdogs: the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Today, the committee begins probing clandestine White House deals with Iran in the "steel box" — where whatever is said remains supersecret.

"This is where we can raise holy, unshirted hell," said committee vice chairman Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt.

The committee was created in 1977 after a lengthy Senate probe of the CIA. It keeps tabs on the CIA, National Security Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency and assorted other U.S. government intelligence units.

Leahy describes the chamber as a "room, within a room, within a room," because of its series of vault-like doors.

Sound cannot escape. The inch-thick walls block radio

transmissions and bar electronic eavesdropping. Electronically generated "white noise" foils recording talk. The cleaning crew is investigated; the room is swept electronically before and after briefings.

To use the restroom, senators must leave: When the room was built in 1984, planners said holes for plumbing lines posed a threat.

"We gain the confidence of those coming before the committee," said staffer Eric Newsome. "They can believe what they say will be protected."

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